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GURU NANAK

Champion of Secularism

By
Gurmit Singh, Advocate

"Guru Nanak showed the humility of all true saints, but he showed also the quiet firmness of God's elect; unmoved by the world's criticisms, he pressed on to secure the victory of God's cause by his own perfect faith and his passionate love for God and man."

*- Duncan Greenless,
The Gospel of the Guru Granth Sahib*



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Champion of Secularism

“At the time of Guru Nanak’s advent, adherence to religion there was none. The spirit of both Hinduism and Islam was hidden beneath a mass of formalities and extraneous observances. Tyranny reigned supreme; the tyranny of might, the tyranny of forms and the tyranny of names... . The Hindus and the Mohammedans quarrelled, the Brahman and the Mullah wrangled, social and political inequalities reigned rampant; there was strife, eternal strife every where.”

This is how Indu Bhushan Banerjee has summed up the conditons prevalant at the time of Guru Nanak’s birth in his scholarly work “Evolution of the Khalsa.”

The term religion has been derived from the term “lagor” which means “to bind”. The object of religion is to keep all united, to protect humanity from internal dissensions and strife, to keep together believers as a family and to show them the way to a united life.

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh faith, says:

“The true Guru is one who uniteth all.”

Siri Rag

But at the time of Guru Nanak’s advent, religion had become a source of internecine conflicts, strifes and hatred. This was a period of Muslim conquest and rule in India and the ruling class was trying to suppress the Hindu society which was suffering already from internal strifes resulting from the rigid caste system. There was great religious intolerance on the part of the Muslim rulers. Depicting the state of affairs Dr. Tara Chand writes:

“The Muslim conquest had a tremendous effect in the

evolution of Indian culture specifically it upset everything, the Hindu religion received a terrible blow, the patronage of the priests and pandits ceased, the Hindu monuments were destroyed, literature received no royal encouragement and languished: to all outward appearance political conquest was synonymous with cultural death."

(Influence of Islam on Hindu culture)

Guru Nanak himself depicted the state of affairs in the following words:

"The Primal Being is called Allah and the Sheikhs have their day."

The temples and gods are taxed, this is the law of the land."

(Basant Hindol M;I)

"The blind subjects" wrote Guru Nanak, "out of ignorance, offer their loyalty to the alien rulers like dead men. While they carry on their peculiar worship at home, they outwardly mimic the manners of the ruling class, reading their books and wearing their fashions in order to be acceptable to them." In every home they call themselves by foreign names, such as 'mian' and speak the language which is not their own."

Guru Nanak, as a champion of liberty, denounced this type of imperialism, declaring:

"All people are under one Sovereign (God) Who holds them responsible for their action; only fools and idiots try to rule over others."

(Rag Basant)

Guru Nanak, therefore, sponsored a movement to ensure that no community should dominate the other in any sphere of life.

His first sermon as a teacher of men was, "There is no Hindu, no Muslim." All were simply men. God's own men, with full human rights to develop man in his divine possibilities. His creed was a creed of unity and he strove for communal harmony and amity. Explaining the meaning of his sermon, he states:

"The Hindu has not found the way of Rama, nor has the Muslim found the way of Rahim." They both fight over the names of God.

When Guru Nanak visited Macca, he was asked by the Qazis and the Mullahs, which of the two religions, Islam and Hinduism, was superior. He put the questioners to shame by the unanswerable logic of his replies and the earnest devotion of his manner. His reply was "without good acts both would suffer and neither, as such would be acceptable to God." When they further asked him whether he was a Muslim or a Hindu, he remarked, "I am neither of the two. I am only a plaything made of five elements."

What Guru Nanak preached was that truth is the same as preached by all religions, through refraction it appears for the time being variegated even as light does through prism. He believed that the unity of different religions cannot be achieved at the external level. It has to be realised in an inward and spiritual way without prejudice to any particular forms. He held no bias against other religions. Nor did he believe that salvation is to be had through any particular religion. God does not refuse his truth, his love and grace to any one who in sincerity seeks Him, wherever he may be and whatever creeds he may profess. He prayed:

"Oh Lord, save yourself (your own creation) as it pleaseth you".

Guru Nanak's teaching were a symbol of the harmony between the two communities. A popular verse describes him as guru of the Hindus and a pir of the Muslims. It reads:

"Guru Nanak Shah fakir Hindu ka Guru, Mussulman ka Pir"

In many of his travels he was accompanied by Bala a Hindu, and Mardana, a Muslim. Each sat by his side as he preached.

He tried to effect a reconciliation between the Hindu and the Mohammedan religions. His teachings went a long way to round off the angularities of both these religious ideologies.

When Guru Nanak died no one could say what religion he professed. His disciples quarrelled among themselves as to whether the last rites should be performed according to the Hindu or Muslim practice.

"We will burn the dead body", said the Hindus.

"We will bury it" said the Muslims."

To settle the dispute some one suggested that the sheet covering the holy remains of Sri Guru Sahib be first removed. All agreed to this but when the sheet was removed, the body had already vanished (merged into the elements). Disciples of both the religions, divided the sheet on half and half basis. The Hindus cremated their half according to their rites and the Muslims buried it. The Muslims erected a tomb in his honour on the bank of the river Ravi.

Guru Ji not only denounced communal clashes, he also denounced caste denominations and espoused the cause of so called low caste people. The Hindu Social code was different for

various castes. Shudra, the low caste, was discriminated against in every sphere of life and was even denied access to the scriptures. Guru Nanak declared that his preachings applied equally to people of all castes.

He declared that castes and their prerogatives are not there in the next world and one can gain merit. not through his birth in a particular caste but by the goodness of one's deeds. He therefore preached equality of men by saying:

*"There is one Father
We are all His children."*

He further declared :

*"There is only one Supreme God
By whom all men are made,
Nay, the whole Universe is born of Him
Then none is good and none is bad"*

Guru Ji tried to bring about a complete and basic revolution in the social ideas and social organisation of the society. To quote Indu bhushan Banerjee :

"Guru Nanak was a revolutionary who aimed at upsetting the cherished institution of society in which he was born, bringing about a social cataclysm and building a new order on the ruins of old."

He declared "Nanak, none is high, none is low," "Vain are the distinctions based on caste and pedigree as all human beings look up to one protector". Further, he says "caste and distinctions depend upon one's actions and deeds." "All castes are vain and the applause of worldly people 'vainglorious.'" "I recognise no caste; there is only brotherhood, that of humanity and only one pollution, that of separateness."

He declared that true religion unites people together as

member of one family devoted to a common cause. Conflict or hatred is the way of negation, of irreligion, of frustration. He says:

"Nanak, the true Guru must be such as to unite all the men." "He who looks on all men as equal is religious."

Thus we find that Guru Nanak was the champion of equality and secularism. His religion was the religion of man. His mission has a special significance for the modern world. His message of love, equality and fraternity will continue to inspire people in times to come.

Thus Spake Guru Nanak

**"Truth is above everyting but
higher still is the living of
TRUTH**

Relevance To Our Times

Guru Nanak's teachings are valid and relevant to this age of science and technology as they were when propounded. There is something of perennial freshness surrounding his thought. Rather it would be apt to say that never before has mankind needed the message of Guru Nanak more urgently than today, because despite, scientific and technological progress the world is still torn with suspicion and jealousy.

Today, when the fissiparous tendencies are trying to raise their ugly heads and communal strifes are again overtaking the country mankind can yet be saved if our daily life is built around the new synthesis which Guru Nanak preached. In the words of Arnold Toynbee, "Guru Nanak's religion is a synthetic religion i.e. an attempt to unite the two fundamentally opposed faiths, namely Hinduism and Islam. His teachings pulsate with love and respect for all. An apostle of peace, he preached universal brotherhood and amity among nations and communities". He preached abolition of all distinctions based on caste and creed, for he said, "Call everyone as high, none is low for God, the only potter, has fashioned all alike and his light pervades all creation, whom call high and whom low, when we see the same God within all."

His very first message to the world was, "there is neither Hindu nor a Musalman." He thus communicated that for all human beings religion is only a matter of personal faith. He says in Ramkali, "They who know God here, recognise Him hereafter too, the rest Hindu, Muslim is all a vain boast" He, therefore, strove on a synthesis between Hinduism and Islam and

propounded on eclectic faith which developed into Sikhism. He preached that all religions sprang from and were the manifestations of the one reality He said "As there is but one Sun though producing different seasons. So, O Nanak, there is but one God though He manifests Himself in different forms.

(Asa M : I)

Again he says.

"God's bounties are common to all. It is we who have created these divisions and distinctions."

(Basant M : I)

The way of religion, as explained by Guru Nanak, is the performance of good and virtuous actions arising from a sense of one's duty. When he visited Mecca, the Muslim priests asked him which was superior, Islam or Hinduism. Guru Nanak replied, politely, "Divorced from good deeds both will not find a place in God's court." He says :

*"Words do not a saint or sinner make
Action alone is written in the book to fate
What we sow that alone we take
O Nanak, be saved or forever transmigrate."*

He, therefore, assigns the highest place to truthful living in his teachings says :

*"Truth is high,
Higher still is truthful living".*

(Sri Reg)

He did not merely preach, he himself lived a truthful life. As a householder, a service man, a trader and a farmer he lived up to the highest precepts he had enunciated. His advice to the people of different sections of the community is couched in the simplest terminology.

To the Householder

*"If thou must the path of true religion see,
Abide among the world's impurities free."*

To the Serviceman

*Put your heart and soul in the service
Have faith in God and perform your duty
Let control over evil, urge you to do the task
So that all have praise for you
The Lord will then see you through His Grace
And your glory will be enhanced manyfold."*

To the Farmer

Let the mind be the farmer and good actions farming. Let the body be the field and water it with hard labour. Let God's Name be the levelling. Put the fence of humble living to protect the field. Deeds of affection will enable the seeds to sprout. Indeed they are fortunate who have such a field."

To the Shopkeeper

Let the fluttering time be your shop. True Name be the stock into trade, Divine thoughts and conscienceness be the vessels. To store the (Precious) wares. Have dealing with men of God to gain profit and attain real happiness."

He stressed the earning of one's livelihood through honest labour and the sharing of it with others. "In the whole wide world that I see around me" says he in Jap Ji, "nothing can be got without effort and exertion."

He, therefore, declares : "They alone realise the true faith who toil and share their earnings with others". He condemns

unearned income and parasitology by declaring, "Cursed are those who swell their bellies by over eating."

He condemned misappropriation of the share of the others as vehemently as the scriptures had condemned the eating of beef for a Hindu and pork for a Muslim. He warned that fascination for another man's wife, wealth or woman's beauty amounted to the impurity of the eyes.

He stressed the need not only for good actions but also good speech. "Where ever we sit we should speak well" he added, "Do not be led to quarrel by calling anyone bad".

Guru Nanak may rightly be called the father of the idea of an Indian nation. When through diversified assembly of races and religion fragmentation into castes, creed and even languages arising from the varying range of social and cultural levels inhibiting the people of this vast sub-continent, peoples thoughts were confined to narrow groves. It was Guru Nanak who seriously considered the state of India and felt grieved at the helplessness of the masses. When other people thought and spoke only for and about their communities Guru Nanak spoke for India, the motherland of us all.

Depicting Babar's invasion of India, he wrote "Baber the Mughal, has rushed from Kabul with sin as his marriage party and demands in forced marriage, the possession of our motherland." He warned the people, "Those who live in sin shall have their life's garment torn to tatters and shreds, let India remember my words." He felt that Babar was a scourge sent by God to punish the evil doers. Addressing God, he says "you have saved Khurasan and terrified India. Creator, you do not take the blame (of punishing the evil doers) on yourself and so have sent Babar as the agent of Death."

While recognising the unity of India, Guru Nanak wanted people of various regions and communities to preserve their individual culture and values. He condemned those who had forsaken their distinctiveness and had started copying the language, fashion and habits of the ruling class to please the rulers. He wrote The Kshatriyas have forsaken their religion and adopted the language of the foreigners. They have lost their distinctiveness by pursuing the ways of foreign rulers and no one now cherishes any regard for religion and righteousness. People have changed their mode of salutation and prefer to be greeted the Muslim way. "They wear blue clothes in order to be acceptable to the ruling class.

Guru Nanak was the boldest of all the apostles. He was never afraid of calling a spade a spade. He always sought to beard the lion in his own den. He visited the temple of Jaganath, s strong-hold of orthodox Hinduism and preached to the iconoclasts. He went to Mecca and lay on the ground with his feet towards the Kaaba to justify the omnipresence of God. He visited Baghdad, capital of Muslim world of that time, entered a mosque, and shouted the first part of the kalima (La-illah-il-Allah) but refused to shout the second half (Muhammad or Rasul Allah) because to him not only prophet Muhammad but all the prophets were equal, and therefore, he refused specially to mention the name of Muhammad. He always remained undaunted by hostile surrounding.

We may sum up the relevance of Guru Nanak's teachings for the present times by quoting Dr. R. C. Majumdar, a well known historian. he writes :

"The ideal of integration found its best and most successful practical in the growth of Sikhism. It fused together

the two warring elements-Islam and Hindu-into an organic unity. Such a complete fusion between two highly developed religions which did not leave behind the least trace of original differences after Nanak's time, and serves as the only practical example of an ideal which was devoutly wished for by many but has baffled the attempts of all others. Even today it is the shining example of an integration of Hindu and Muslim cultures which is a like the ideal and despair of the politicians of modern India."

"One might seriously, and not without good reasons, question the desirability, or the possibility on a large scale, of such a fusion, from the not very unlikely apprehension that one of its practical effects would be the effacement from the face of the earth, of all living traces and traditions of religious sects whose history goes back to hoary antiquity and which has played a dominant role in the evolution of human culture. But whatever one might think of it, there is no doubt that the small religious sect founded by Nanak has fulfilled a great mission and has proved its value as a successful response to a great challenge by standing like a rock against the mighty floods of Muslim tyranny and bigotry which at one time threatened to submerge the Hindu culture. This has been achieved mainly due to the fact that the Sikh community though small in number has developed through rich cultural and religious legacy doctrines, the ideal of social equality, democratic ideas, patriotic fervour and a heroic spirit of valour and self-sacrifice. Though a small community, the Sikhs saved themselves in a critical situation by their own efforts and saved others by their noble example."

(Guru Nanak's impact on Indian History)

Encomiums were lavished by no less a poet than Sir Mohd. Iqbal the famous Urdu poet. In his poem 'Nanak' composed in 1908 he has depicted the condition of India as it was at the time of Guru Nanak's advent and about Guru Nanak's impact. He writes :

"The (Hindu) nation paid no heed to the message of Gotama Budha

And she failed to recognise the shining pearl

How sad the unheeding ones remained deaf to the message of truth,

Indeed the tree is unaware of the sweetness of its fruit.

The secret of life indeed was disclosed by the Budha

But India remained engaged in the pride of its contemplative thought.

India's assembly was not illumined by the light of divine radiance

Divine grace descended like rain but the arid soil was not receptive.

*Alas; India remains a house of bondage for the low caste man,
Her heart dead to the sufferings of fellow men,*

The Brahmin is still proud of his vain philosophy,

While the light of Budha shines in the stranger's home,

The idol house of India radiated with light once again,

Again the voice of Tauhid was raised in the Punjab,

And a perfect man awoke India from her muse."

THE LORD OF ALL

Pure he was, purity he preached.
Lovely he was; So love he preached.
Humble he was; So humility he preached.
Divine he was; So divinity he preached.
Apostle of peace & justice he was.
Incarnation of equality and purity he was.
Devotion of Bhakti he pleaded of course;
Gives Nanak message to all
That God above all, is
The Lord of all.

(Poet Nauniyal Singh Layal)

Guru Nanak is in line of the great saints who emphasize personal experience of the Divine and a life of service to humanity as the essential elements to pure religion. He repudiated the caste divisions and the ceremonial aspect which became mixed up with religion in India.

*- S. Radha Krishnan,
Occasional Speeches and writings*